Richard Li
Advocacy Fellowship

Question 1 (Project Explanation):

Our project seeks to answer the question: *is funding social services more effective at reducing crime than funding police departments?* We are conducting a large-scale study of 70 cities over the last 30 years, to investigate how municipal budgeting decisions have affected crime rates.

We intend to demonstrate that dollar-for-dollar, cities are better off investing in social programs that address the root causes of crime and poverty, instead of expanding policing efforts that marginalize Black communities and reproduce poverty.

We are working closely with organizers in various cities to support their defund discussions with city councils. We believe this evidence-based approach can communicate the work of prison abolitionists to policymakers through a shared language.

Background

Our current system of policing and prisons harms Black communities. Black people are disproportionately targeted by police,[1] subject to police violence,[2] and incarcerated.[3] This has rendered the carceral system a central feature of poor Black communities, impacting not only those directly affected but also their families.[4] The outcomes of the carceral system further reproduce poverty, as those marked with criminal records face exclusion from housing, employment, welfare, and voting.[5] This reinforces a system of racialized social control that draws on legacies from slavery and Jim Crow.[6]

Despite these harms, mass incarceration has repeatedly shown to be ineffective at reducing crime. Increased incarceration accounted for only 6% of the decrease in property crimes since 1990, and 0% of the decrease in violent crimes.[7] These minimal benefits come at a cost of $182 billion each year, in which policing accounts for $63 billion.[8]

To identify better alternatives, we must first consider the structural causes of crime – poverty, insecure housing and employment, mental illness, community disinvestment.[9] These social conditions emerged en masse with the neoliberal restructuring of the economy in the 1970s, which eroded labor protections and retrenched the welfare state.[10] This set the stage for mass incarceration the following decade.

Deindustrialization marked the first major economic shift, creating concentrated zones of unemployment in urban Black neighborhoods.[11] Stable manufacturing jobs were replaced with precarious wage work, with the deregulation of the labor market.[12]

At the same time, governments sharply reduced spending on welfare. Poor Black Americans were forced to choose between substandard options – an unlivable wage, inadequate services, or the illegal markets. Mass incarceration arose, as Loic Wacquant describes, to warehouse the social disorders that followed the fraying of the social safety net.[13] Studies have shown that states weakened welfare systems were associated with stronger penal systems during this period.[14]

This project of retrenching welfare gained legitimacy through the association of social services with Blackness (the "welfare queen"). Poverty and unemployment were constructed to be

personal moral failures, ignoring any structural economic analysis. Poverty became linked with cultural inferiorities, laziness, and criminal proclivities. These racialized narratives constructed Black Americans as frauds and criminals, simultaneously justifying both welfare contraction and carceral expansion.[15]

The proposed solution for decarceration is simply a reversal of the neoliberal policies that created the conditions for mass incarceration in the first place. By investing in social services, mental health, secure jobs and housing, we address the underlying social conditions that lead to crime. This preventative approach, prison abolitionists argue, would render the carceral system obsolete.[16]

Our hypothesis is that dollar-for-dollar, social investments are more effective at reducing crime than funding police and prisons. By testing this hypothesis, we advocate for the reallocation of billions of dollars of carceral funding to social programs.

Our study focuses on crime reduction and cost, as these are the two metrics most important to policymakers. Predictably, reducing the roles of police and prisons trigger fears of lawlessness, while funding social programs raises objections about budgets. Thus, we explicitly design our study around these two metrics to address the concerns of policymakers. We have faith that by meeting these goals, we will also uplift Black communities, build generational wealth, and secure housing and employment – which are the true end goals.

Methods

Our proposed project has two components: 1) a research study investigating how social investments affect crime rates, and 2) the application of these results to support defund discussions with city councils.

For our research study, we estimate the causal effect of funding social programs and police departments on crime rates. This allows us to compare the crime reducing effect of different programs. For example, a $1 million increase in funding for public housing may lead to a 9% decline in crime rates, while the same increase for police leads to a 7% decline.

We use two data sources: the Census Survey of Municipal Finances[17] for city budgets and the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR)[18] for crime rates. We have data available for every US city/municipality from 1991-2019, from which we select the 70 largest cities. We track the following forms of municipal spending: welfare, healthcare, education, housing, and police and corrections. This allows us to compare the crime reducing effect of individual programs, as well as combinations of programs.

Ideally we want to measure public safety, for which crime serves as a proxy. Crime is a social construct, which has evolved with race and class associations of criminality. Police-reported crime rates tend to reflect the enforcement of crime, rather than its prevalence. Victimization rates are a better measure of actual crime, but this data is not available at the city level. Thus we proceed with the UCR dataset, acknowledging that it serves as an imperfect proxy for public safety.

We first perform regression analysis to identify which social programs are most associated with crime reduction. In order to make causal claims, we need to control for other factors that may explain changes in crime, such as local and macro-economic conditions (e.g. 2008 recession), or shifts in population. We can then conduct casual inference. We use a potential outcomes framework, defining a family of lag-p estimands suited to our panel data. A detailed description of this framework can be found in our paper here.[19]

Note: In the following section, we intend to provide policymakers with research that is evidence-based, and rooted in social scientific methods. If this is considered lobbying, please disregard the this section. We can focus exclusively on the research component of this project.

After conducting this research, we provide organizers with materials to support their defund discussions with city councils. We are currently working with the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force in Oakland and Decriminalize Seattle. These organizations have informed our research design and provided recommendations for tailoring our work to their city's needs.

Defund discussions in Oakland have been challenged by the surge in gun violence, owing partly to pandemic-induced unemployment and school closures. Both city leaders and activists are torn between the long-term benefits of investing in social programs, and the immediate need to protect their communities.

As part of this study, we will provide estimates on how many years are typically required for changes in program funding to be reflected in crime rates. This may help city leaders anticipate and plan for public safety challenges in the short term, while implementing a longer term reallocation plan.

To support Seattle's participatory budgeting process, we plan to incorporate community-run programs into our study. We acknowledge that state-run programs have a history of being coercive and paternalistic,[20] whereas community organizations are better attuned the needs of the community. The latter has presented us with data collection challenges, but we believe it is crucial for telling the full story.

We will be continuously working with our colleagues throughout this research process, to tailor our work to their needs. We hope to reach out to more organizers in different cities to support their defund discussions as well.

Question 2 (Personal Experiences, Skills, and Attributes):

My interest in social justice was set in motion by Ferguson, and cultivated through my work at the needle exchange. Our unhoused clients are routinely targeted by police for nuisance and drug crimes, placing them in a revolving door of incarceration, mental illness, and homelessness. This was my first exposure to the criminalization of poverty. Over time, I came to see harm reduction and nonjudgment as effective alternatives to punishment and control.

Two years ago, I was a victim of home invasion and armed robbery. As I was processing my trauma, I was shocked to learn that many people from my neighborhood had multiple experiences of violence and assault. I came to understand my experience as a spillover effect of the collective scarcity and trauma in the community. This was a pivotal moment for me that shifted my focus to criminal legal reform.

This project was born out of activism from last summer. I wanted to seize the opportunity to push for revolutionary change, using the data methods I am familiar with. I am applying to this fellowship to fund this project, which I hope will launch my career in social science research. I plan to pursue a PhD afterwards, and contribute to the body of research at the intersection of the carceral system and neoliberal capitalism. In particular, I want to study how our global economic system is predicated on racial exploitation and subjugation.

My background in statistics and data science position me well to carry out this project. I have extensive experience working with large datasets, building models,[21] and conducting causal inference and regression analysis.[19] My work has been published in academic journals[22] and popular media.[23] I am comfortable conducting independent research, and communicating my work to different audiences.

In my previous work on climate action, I also have experience working with policymakers. I have presented my research to the California Senate, which was cited as evidence for legislation for the electrification of Uber and Lyft vehicles.[24] I have also facilitated discussions among regulators, policymakers, private companies, and the public. I can understand the needs of different stakeholders, to present my work more effectively.

I believe my technical expertise and policy experience, as well as my knowledge about the criminal legal system, position me well to carry out this work.

From my position of privilege, I do not have the lived experiences of police violence and incarceration, nor do I live in a community where this is an ordinary dimension of life. Thus I am continuously drawing on Black leadership to ensure my work is aligned with the goals of marginalized Black communities.

Question 3 (Time Commitment):

I am currently working on this research project full time. Aside from this work, I am providing pro bono analysis for the ACLU at 5 hrs/week, which I would terminate if I received this fellowship.

During the course of this fellowship, I may enroll in some statistics or sociology classes to assist me with conducting this research. I would enroll in no more than one class at a time, requiring 5 hrs/week. This fellowship would not be used to fund these classes.

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